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SUBJECT: PATIENT LEE STILL STUCK ON THE RUNWAY

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Political consultant Park Sung-min told poloffs over a recent lunch that President Lee Myung-bak was in dire straits. Neither President Lee nor his staff understood the reasons behind Lee's flagging popularity (stuck around 25 percent in recent polls) and had no idea what to do to recover the public's trust. Park laid out three political choices that Lee faces in trying to overcome his current moribund situation. Unfortunately, Park predicted the options that might save him -- embracing rival Park Geun-hye or striking out in a new political direction -- were both unlikely. Park Sung-min predicted that the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) could split up before the 2012 National Assembly elections and that --whether or not Lee improves his sagging support rates -- Park Geun-hye would find it difficult to win the presidency in 2012. End Summary

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Lee's Three Choices  
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¶2. (SBU) One of the most respected voices on domestic political trends, consultant Park Sung-min told poloffs that President Lee Myung-bak had three political paths to choose from as he tries to recover the public support that has substantially evaporated just eight months into his term. First, Lee could embrace political party rival Park Geun-hye and support her candidacy for president in 2012. If he did this, Lee would naturally gain the support of those who support Park, in and out of the National Assembly. His second option is to make a bold move toward "new politics" by abandoning his attacks on the "lost 10 years" of the previous two presidents. Instead, Lee could embrace the positive accomplishments of his predecessors and try to improve upon them rather than emphasizing ideological differences between himself and former progressive presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung. This choice would mean scaling back attacks on "left-wing forces" in Korea today and reaching out to Honam (the traditionally liberal stronghold of North and South Jeolla) supporters to quell regional rivalries. Third, he could ignore his low approval rate, give favorable positions to his close aides and use the executive branch's extensive powers to attack elements not supportive of his presidency (NGOs, businesses, politicians). Park said after the beef controversy, Lee had been taking the third option.

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Misreading Lee's Popularity  
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¶3. (SBU) According to Park and acknowledged by our Blue House contacts, President Lee is waiting for his support rate to get over 30 percent before putting forward controversial legislation and taking decisive actions. Park said that this strategy comes from an overly optimistic assessment of Lee's popularity. He was elected with only 48 percent of the vote with a turnout of 62 percent -- so really only 30 percent of the Korean people supported him. Even among those who voted for him, many did not like Lee but simply supported the GNP or Park Geun-hye. Since about half of those who voted for Lee supported Park Geun-hye, it is logical that Lee's support in polls would hover between 20 and 30 percent. Lee should not hesitate to act, Park argued, because his support rate will not improve on its own. Lee's advisors fundamentally overestimate how popular Lee is, and, until they accept that Lee is not a popular figure, they can not reform their strategy.

¶4. (SBU) Many in the Lee Administration thought that Lee's low popularity was due to attacks by the left-wing media -- notably KBS and MBC. Park said that Lee's advisors believe that if they reform media and install pro-Lee management to the main government-controlled media outlets, Lee's popularity will go up; this was a misguided assumption by Lee and his advisors. In the same vein, Park said that Lee had chosen to attack former President Roh but that these attacks would not boost Lee's popularity.

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Future of the GNP Bleak  
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¶5. (SBU) In Korea one year after taking power, the ruling party usually seeks to reorganize. Therefore, in 2009, the GNP will likely try to reorganize, restructure or at least change leadership with a party convention. Supporters of former lawmaker and close Lee Myung-bak aide Lee Jae-o hope for an early convention to oust current GNP Chair Park Hee-tae while Park Geun-hye supporters hope for a later convention after the 2010 local elections.

¶6. (SBU) Touching on the prospects for some of the GNP leaders, Park noted that he would not advise Lee Jae-o to run again for the National Assembly in a by-election in 2009, but rather seek a cabinet position. Park Sung-min thought Park Geun-hye might have real difficulty in becoming president in 2012 because there will likely be backlash against the GNP candidate if Lee continues to have tepid support. Conversely, if Lee recovers his popularity toward the end of his term, he would attempt to give the candidacy to one of his supporters instead of Park.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) President Lee's performance has been frustrating and disappointing for many conservatives who had hoped the new president would act quickly on social and political issues such as education, labor and real estate. Instead he appears unable and, worse, unwilling to do much of anything, thus triggering the current debate whether this is all there is to the LMB presidency. Certainly, Park's view that Lee's coterie of yes-men will not likely give him the tough message that he needs to stop treading water and pick a direction in which to swim is gaining more coinage, especially on tough social and political reforms Lee had promised.

STEPHENS